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ABSTRACT

In developing an interactive model of composing, this paper discusses three groups of reader-oriented theories, each of which provides composing theorists with some research and theory to use in developing such a model. First the paper discusses the main principle of the literary reader-response theorists--that the meaning and value of texts do not exist until readers read and respond to them. Second, the paper explores cognitive reader theories--how writers consider and interact with their readers--and explains how readers draw upon schemata to help fill in the gaps and how writers draw upon audience schemata gained from experiences as writers and readers. The paper then focuses on context-oriented reading theory--the belief that schemata are products of the environment in which language occurs. The paper concludes that developing an interactive model of composing moves beyond the constraints of one discipline, helps to patch up the current composition/literature split, and shows the necessity of using writing in the literary classroom. (EL)

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What Reader-Oriented Literary and Cognitive Theories Have to Give to
Composing Theory

We would like to develop, today, an interactive model of composing. As a first step in that direction, I would like to talk about three groups of reader-oriented theories, each of which provides composing theorists with some research and theory to use in developing such a model. By "interactive," we do not mean what Louise Rosenblatt apparently does in the most recent issue of Research in the Teaching of English, where she argues that an "interactive" model assumes a mechanistic, information-processing approach to the relationship between reader and text. In fact, our meaning is probably closer to what Rosenblatt means by a "transactive" model, which, she states, has a more organic, developmental, and contextual approach to the relationship between reader and text. In particular, by interactive model, we mean two things: first, a model that sees audience as something writers consider throughout the writing process, not just during a pre-writing stage labelled "audience analysis"; and second, a model that includes, not only writers' inferences about their audiences, but also a description of the actual interaction that occurs between writer and reader during the writing process, that is, the specific feedback and response provided by readers, whether they are teachers, peers, or 'real' audiences, during the writing process. In other words, in an interactive model of composing, audience becomes a generative, inventive force in the composing process.

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Before starting, I'd like to explain the unwieldy nature of my title. "Reader-Response Theory" would have been far more pleasing than "Literary-Oriented Literary and Cognitive Theory," with a certain style from the alliteration and with a certain familiarity to the term. You would have heard "reader response" and been able to say, perhaps immediately, "Oh yeah, those guys," and you would have known, approximately, what I was going to talk about. If you were literature teachers and this were MLA, probably at least some of you would have heard "reader response," and you would have said, a bit more negatively, "Oh yeah, those guys," adding, "the ones who think student rambles about their personal problems are more important than what Faulkner has to say." In other words, I could have drawn upon what I inferred you knew and believed about my subject to decide how to approach it.

I prefer not to use the term "reader-response," however, not because I wish to keep you from drawing upon your stored knowledge on the subject, and not because I wish to forestall any of your objections to it, but because I believe the term to be misleading. It is currently used for any literary theory or criticism that takes as its focus the reader of a text rather than the text itself. An example of this tendency is seen in the title of Jane Tompkins' extremely helpful anthology of reader-oriented theoretical articles entitled Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism, which includes all sorts of reader-oriented literary theories, only some of which are truly "reader-response" theories. People use "reader response" to mean anyone from Wayne Booth to David Bleich to Stanley Fish. Of the three names just mentioned, only Bleich could be classified as a reader-response critic, for only he takes as his main area

of investigation the way readers respond to literary texts. Booth is more interested, of course, in how a text creates a reader, and Fish is more interested in how a social context creates a reader who creates a text. Since not all theories concerned with the reader are concerned with response, I prefer, therefore, to use the term "reader-oriented theory."

The issue of reading is not, of course, simply a literary one, and in fact, most reader-oriented literary theorists have found that, to explore the issue of reading and readers, they need to move outside the text-based discipline of English and into one of the human-based disciplines of the social sciences. In fact, to be a reader-oriented literary theorist, one usually needs to explore the issue of reading in the context of some social science theory: thus, Norman Holland explores reading in the context of psychoanalysis, while the German receptionaesthetik theorists explore it in the context of sociology. In my own case, I have been exploring reading in the context of cognitive psychology. Hence, my title. I am not alone in considering this context. A great many psychologists and educational researchers—people like Frank Smith and Norman Rumelhart--have also drawn from cognitive psychology, especially in order to explore how to teach children to read.

Group One: Literary Reader-Response Theorists

My first group of reader-oriented theorists could, at least some of them, be properly called literary "reader-response" theorists. I include in this group Louise Rosenblatt, David Bleich, Norman Holland, Wolfgang Iser, Murray Schwartz, and Walter Slatoff. The main principle of these theorists

is not, as their detractors fear, that texts do not exist, but that their meaning and value does not exist until readers read them and respond to them—that is, until readers do something. What this action or response is depends upon the formulation of the individual theorist. For Bleich, the action is a written response, which one writes for oneself and then gradually revises for a public audience (Readings and Feelings); for Holland, the response is an oral response on tape, which one examines and then analyzes (5 Readers Reading); for Rosenblatt, the response is also an oral response, but this time occurring in classroom discussion (Exploration). The responses of Iser and Schwartz occur, on the other hand, not after reading but during reading. Iser calls the response a "concretization" and Schwartz calls it a "working out" that occurs in the provisional space between author and reader. This working out can also be transformed, later, into a verbal artifact, in this case, criticism.

In all cases, readers respond by making language of their own. By generalizing about these theories, I do not mean to imply they are all the same. There are some very significant differences among them, as Rosenblatt points out in her recent article, and as Bleich and Holland point out in their frequent internecine battles. However, without glossing over the differences, I believe we can assert that these theories do share some assumptions. The first assumption they share is that literature provides an opportunity for self-examination, for clarifying values, and for increasing one's understanding of the self and others. Second, they believe that this opportunity occurs in the process of responding to (not just reading) literature: either the exploration emerges out of the response, as in Rosenblatt's theory, or it emerges by exploring the response later, as in

Holland's theory. And third, they agree that this response will differ from individual to individual.

Now what does this have to do with composing theory, especially a composing theory not primarily concerned with literary composition, although literary composition may be included in its domain? What can these theories tell us about writers? And what can they tell us to tell to writers? What they provide us with are not particular techniques writers can use in thinking about audience; rather, what they provide us with is an attitude toward the relationship between reader, writer, and text that is necessary in developing an interactive theory of composing. This attitude is one of scepticism toward the inviolability, the permanence, the meaningfulness of a text. The value of such an anti-logocentric attitude is that it forces attention away from words as magical objects and toward the "others" to whom writers communicate. The object of study is no longer the word or the text, but human thought and behavior.

With the emphasis shifted away from the text and toward the reader, composing becomes a human activity, not an English teacher's activity. This is a crucial step in describing composing, because it means that the act of composing written discourse requires writers not to draw on those special skills only English teachers seem to know, but on all the knowledge about human interaction they have been developing all their lives.

The most important implication of reader-response theory for a composing theory can be phrased as a reminder: readers have intentions too. The issue of writers' intentions is, of course, a thorny one in literary theory; the issue of readers' intentions is becoming, rightly so, a thorny one in composition research as well. By saying that readers have intentions

I mean, roughly, what Rosenblatt means by saying that, in a reader's response, "there are selective factors molding that response" (Exploration 42). Molding any response are a reader's intentions, which include beliefs, feelings, and knowledge. Each reader-response theorist considers the fact that readers have intentions, although which intentions each considers depends on the theorist. For example, Bleich focusses on those intentions related to feelings: readers' emotional states affect their responses to a text. Rosenblatt, on the other hand, stresses a reader's beliefs and values, while Iser is concerned with a reader's knowledge. Iser, for example, points out that it is crucial to authors that readers bring knowledge to the reading process, for "no tale can ever be told in its entirety . . . Whenever the flow is interrupted and we are led off in unexpected directions, the opportunity is given to us to bring into play our own faculty for establishing connections--for filling in gaps left by the text itself" ("Reading Process" 280).

The models these literary theorists build of reading all include a reader with intentions. Our interactive model of composing must also include a reader with intentions--a reader that feels, knows, thinks, and believes. The crucial question, of course, is how? A discrete step called "audience analysis" is not sufficient. The performance of such an activity might be what writing teachers tell their students to do, but we do not believe that it reflects the actual processes of writers.

Group Two: Cognitive Reader Theories

My second group of reading-oriented theorists provide an answer to the question of how writers consider and interact with their readers. This second group includes cognitive psychologists such as Frederic Bartlett and Jerome Bruner, information-processing specialists such as Roger Schank and Robert Abelson, and reading specialists such as Norman Rumelhart, Frank Smith, and Kenneth Goodman. Such theorists work with an important concept, the concept of a schema, which is helpful in designing an interactive model of the composing process.

A schema is simply a body of stored knowledge organized hierarchically in the mind, thus allowing for efficient storage and easy access. In reading, readers' use of schemas allows them to, in Bruner's words, "go beyond the information given." That is, what they see on the page will allow them to tap into knowledge they already have, knowledge they can then draw upon to help comprehend a text. This is often called "bottom-up" or "data-driven" processing. Reading researchers have also proposed "top-down" or "conceptually-driven" models, in which readers' prior knowledge allows them to predict what they will see, again drawing upon prior knowledge to help them comprehend a text. Norman Rumelhart and others have argued that both sorts of processing occur, an argument I have found persuasive ("Toward an Interactive Model of Reading"). In all cases, however, the point is that schemas represent the range of tacit knowledge about people, about discourse, and about the world that readers draw upon in order to understand what they read.

When reading, for example, "The man drove into the Macdonald's drive-in, then ordered and ate a Big Mac," few Americans would need a precise specification of the process of ordering in a drive-in or of eating

a sandwich in order to comprehend this sentence, nor would they need a precise definition of Macdonald's or a Big Mac. Such knowledge is stored cognitively in their minds under schemas, which they draw upon to fill in the gaps while reading. There might be an "eating" schema, for example, and a "fast-food restaurant" schema, and probably subordinated to that, an "ordering at a fast-food restaurant" schema. According to Rumelhart, schemas are like plays, in that they specify who does what in certain situations; they are also like theories, in that they generalize from prior experiences and predict future ones; and finally, they are like procedures, in that they help a person act ("Building Blocks" 33-58).

The concept of schemas can become limited and static, however, unless the theory also explains how schemas are put into action. Schemas do not remain inert in the mind; rather, they are organic structures, constantly adapting in response to new experiences, constantly evaluating their ability to predict. They act, in a sense, as bridges between the past and the future. Piaget suggests there are two ways people adapt to new experiences: they can assimilate these experiences into their current schemas, or they can accomodate to these experiences by modifying their current schemas (Play, Dreams, and Imitation). Such assimilation and accomodation goes on whenever people read. It takes more than the possession of schemas to be able to read. The schemas must also be put into action. The cognitive reading theorists see reading as a problem-solving process, in which schemas are used to solve problems. In Frank Smith's view, for example, reading is a process of reducing uncertainty, and readers constantly draw upon what they already know to help them reduce their uncertainty about what is on the page (Understanding Reading). What

they already know includes their schematic knowledge, as well as what they've already read, the data on the page. What they have already read causes them to tap into their schematic knowledge, which allows them to predict what's likely to occur. Thus, they need not read every single word in a text, but only what is necessary for reducing uncertainty. This description of reading as problem-solving or gap-filling is very similar to the early formulations of Stanley Fish, as in "Literature in the Reader," as well as the gap-filling theory of Wolfgang Iser already mentioned and the discourse processing theory developed by George Dillon.

If this is what readers are doing, drawing upon schemas to help them fill in the gaps when they read, then what is it that writers are doing? What are the implications of schema theory and problem-solving theory for an interactive model of composing? The main implication of these theories can again be formulated in the form of advice: there will always be gaps in the text. No writer will ever spell out everything; writers will always have to depend upon readers' constructive processes.

According to Norman Rumelhart, there are three reasons, from a schema-theoretical perspective, why a reader may fail to comprehend a text:

1. The reader may lack the appropriate schema.
2. The reader may have the schema, but the author's clues are insufficient to suggest it.
3. The reader may use a different schema than that intended by the author ("Building Blocks" 48).

The first reason suggests an important implication for developing an interactive model of composing: writers must have, not only a sense of their audience, but also a sense of the schemas of their audience; in other

words, they need to have extremely rich representations of what their audience knows, believes, and feels, or, as discussed in the last section, of their readers' intentions. One criticism of the traditional mode of audience analysis taught to students is, as Russell Long points out, that it asks students to make a very limited, even stereotypical description of their audience and then write to that audience, a practice of "noxious stereotyping we would not tolerate in any other context" (223). An interactive model based on schema theory avoids this problem.

The audience schemas writers draw upon develop over time as a result of their experiences as writers and readers. Every time people read, they accommodate and assimilate to their audience schemas, just as every time they write, they accommodate to and assimilate into their writer schemas. Moreover, every time people interact with others, they enrich their audience schemas as well, for communicating with readers through written discourse is a sub-category of the larger category of human interaction. I have been considering so far very general audience schemas. There are also specific audience schemas, schemas about audiences in different contexts such as school or work or home; or schemas about particular readers such as one's mother or one's composition teacher. The more people interact with a particular audience or class of audience, the more rich their schemas of that audience. Of course, among those experiences are the specific feedback writers receive during the process of composing and revising. Part of the audience schema of one's composition teacher, for example, develops in response to that teacher's response to, say, a rough draft.

As noted earlier, some comprehension failures occur when the author fails to provide the appropriate clues for a schema, or the reader fails to

pick up on those clues. In other words, either the writer or the reader may have failed to enact the appropriate schemas. A schema theory is not much use unless it can describe the process whereby schemas are put in action. Just as reading, in an interactive model, is seen as a process of problem-solving, so too can writing be seen as a process of problem-solving, as of course is being done by Linda Flower and John Hayes, among others. The problem-solving that occurs during writing with respect to audience is in the form of conditional thinking: if my audience thinks (knows, feels, believes) X, then therefore I need to do (background, explain, elaborate, organize) Y. For example, in writing this paper, I went through a process something like this: I reasoned that, since my audience may have various experiences with and meanings for the word "interactive," I needed to provide a definition of the word as I would be using it.

I do not mean to suggest that I consciously thought about this or talked to myself about it. This conditional thinking does not necessarily need to be consciously articulated. That's the point about schemas; they represent tacit knowledge, as Michael Polyani would put it, knowledge that is so much a part of one's cognitive structure as to, in a sense, "go without saying." Explicit formulation sometimes impedes performance, as when someone walking tries to articulate how to walk. Nevertheless, this thought process needs to be available for articulation if necessary, as when one runs into problems about what to do.

I am working here with the opposition, proposed by reading theorists such as David LaBerge and Jay Samuels, between attention and automaticity. Their assumption is that reading (and we can add writing) is a multi-skilled, hierarchically-ordered process, involving skills such as

perception, letter and word-identification, and comprehension. Ideally, the lower-level skills like perception are automatic, saving one's resources—that is, one's attention—for higher-level skills. The more one attends to a skill, the less one is able to attend to others. Ideally, then, the thinking about audience will be automatic. Of course, such thinking is a fairly high-level skill developmentally, since the writer must be able to think abstractly in a non-egocentric way. So it will not be surprising to find many writers having to attend to such problems fairly often. What the theory predicts, however, is that writers with many varied experiences as readers and as communicators will have less difficulty with this sort of thinking, and will need to attend to it less frequently, for they will have more enriched and flexible audience schemas.

This conditional thinking occurs during the writing process as well as before, that is, diachronically as well as synchronically. While writing, writers' sense of their audiences may change, and they may hope, too, that their audience changes as a result of what's written. Hence, writers may base their decisions about what to do in a text on what they assume will happen to readers while reading the finished product. In other words, audience schemas are constantly assimilating and accomodating, even as the writer writes. What is "given" and what is "new" with respect to an audience constantly changes. During the third paragraph, for example, a writer can presume that more is "given" than during the first. Because of their audience schemas, writers can predict their readers' reading processes. Such predictions are, of course, always constructs, "fictions" as Walter Ong would say, and the accuracy of these predictions will usually affect readers' comprehension. However, writers' sense of their audiences

may also change because of real feedback provided by an audience during the process. That feedback becomes part of the writers' audience schemas, and can be used in the conditional thinking about audience: if my reader thinks this section is confusing, then I need to elaborate here.

This leads us to my final group of reading-oriented theorists, and my final piece of advice, to remember to ask, "Is there a reader in this class?" This final group of theorists suggest the importance of considering context in developing a model of the composing process.

Group Three: Context-Oriented Reading Theorists

As we've seen, audience schemas develop as a result of people's prior experiences as writers and readers. People behave as writers or watch others behave as writers, and gradually they internalize writer schemas; people behave as readers or watch others behave as readers, and gradually they develop reader schemas. As with all learning theories, an important issue is whether this development occurs innately or as a result of the environment. My third group of reading-oriented theorists would argue and provide evidence for the latter: schemas, they argue, are products of the environment—of the contexts or "interpretive communities" in which language occurs. Two theorists, the psychologist Lev Vygotsky, and the literary theorist Stanley Fish, are members of this third group.

Fish's most recent position, as articulated in Is There a Text in This Class? is that meaning is determined by the context in which language is understood. To the fear that reader-oriented theory is subjective, solipsistic, and relativistic—and hence liable to lead to a chaotic world

where anything can mean anything to anyone, and no one can know what anyone else is talking about--Fish points out that, although "relativism is a position one can entertain, it is not a position one can occupy" (Text 319). Hence the question posed by his title means something different depending on the context in which it is understood. If the context is the class of Fish's colleague, a fairly traditional literary scholar, it is a question about a choice of textbook. If the context is Fish's own class, it is a question about the relative status of text and reader. As Fish points out "A sentence . . . is never in the abstract; it is always in a situation, and the situation will already have determined the purpose for which it can be used" (Text 291).

This situation carries with it certain beliefs, assumptions, and knowledge that a participant shares with other participants in the situation. Together, the participants make up an interpretive community, which agrees on what counts as acceptable interpretations of language, meaning, and action. These interpretations "organize perception" (Text 276), so that whenever one is in a situation (which one always is), one understands meanings from within the framework of that interpretive community: "the mental operations we can perform are limited by the institutions in which we are already embedded" (Text 331). These shared assumptions have a psychological dimension; in fact, we might talk about them as schemas shared by members of a community.

A crucial point made by Fish is that one cannot simply shed one's schemas. One's whole way of perceiving and comprehending and behaving is structured by the community in which one operates and by the language of that community. How does this happen? Fish does not consider the

developmental question; however, I believe that Lev Vygotsky's developmental theory of language suggests how these institutional schemas develop.

Vygotsky is, of course, mainly known for his work with inner speech, inarticulated, private, abbreviated speech that is directed inward, toward the self. Many composition researchers use Vygotsky's concept of inner speech, but they often seem to ignore Vygotsky's specific analysis of the concept and treat it instead something like Piaget's egocentric speech, as an intermediate step in the development from a private, inarticulate language, or autism, to a more public language. Vygotsky, however, as he takes great pains to show in Thought and Language and elsewhere, sees inner speech as an intermediate step on the way from social language to private thought. In Vygotsky's view of language development, therefore, there is a gradual movement from outside to inside, from social speech to egocentric speech to inner speech and finally to private thought. Piaget's view, on the other hand, moves from the inside out, from autism to egocentric thought and speech and finally to socialized thought and speech. Whereas Piaget sees language development romantically, as a process whereby the individual is constrained, more and more, by social concerns to speak the language of society, Vygotsky takes a dialectical view, seeing language development as a process whereby the individual develops as a result of social interaction.

As Vygotsky points out, all functions in a child's development follow a process whereby "an interpersonal process is transformed into an intrapersonal one" (Thought and Language 57). All thought is an internalization of external communication. An individual, born with

desires, begins using forms of mediation such as tools and signs to obtain the objects of these desires, not because of innate abilities, but by understanding and then internalizing the meaning given these mediators by others in the environment. For example, a child, reaching to grasp an object, perceives that the reaching causes a reaction from his parents: they give him the object. The action's function thus changes from being an object-directed movement to an interpersonal gesture. Later, the gesture is internalized as a sign, "pointing," thus becoming intrapersonal. A need gives rise to a form of social interaction, which then gives rise to the development of a sign. Vygotsky does not completely trace out this process in the development of written language, that is, writing and reading. What he says, however, is that the development of written language is difficult, because it is a second-order symbolization in which written symbols substitute for sound symbols, which substitute for meaning, and that written language development must start with a need: children must need to comprehend and communicate in written forms (Mind in Society). Although Vygotsky does not follow the process out explicitly, his other theory suggests that what occurs is that this need must lead children to interact with others in such a way that they learn how others use written language to substitute for spoken language, and they then internalize the functions ascribed to written language by others into their own cognitive structures.

The crucial point, of course, is that development does not occur in a vacuum. It occurs in a context--quite often, in the case of reading and writing, in a classroom. In the 1970's, Alan Purves did an interesting study of how students and teachers in different countries responded to literature, by asking them what would be appropriate responses to a

particular text. His results showed a strong correlation among respondents from the same country or from the same school, and he concluded, therefore, that "schools succeeded in imparting to students a preferred way of approaching literary works" (17). In other words, readers internalized the modes found in their environments.

The same process occurs with writing. The process of developing audience schemas occurs in a context where readers actually read and respond, providing feedback to the writers. The nature of that feedback will affect, to some extent, the sorts of audience schemas developed by writers. And the extent to which writers need that feedback will determine whether they internalize it as schemas. If writers receive only critical, evaluative, "teacher" feedback, then the schemas they draw upon to make writing decisions will probably be impoverished and inflexible. And if they are never asked to revise or meet the needs of an audience other than a teacher, then probably they will feel no need for feedback, and may not develop audience schemas at all.

This is why I began this section with the reminder to ask, "Is there a reader in this class?" For any description of an interactive model of composing must include a description, too, of the particular context in which the composing occurs, and especially it must describe the sorts of feedback or responses provided by particular readers in that context. Those responses will be crucial in explaining how writers interact and learn to interact with their readers. Teachers of writing, too, should remember to ask this question. For one crucial implication of these context-oriented reader theories is that writers need to experience a variety of readers in

order to develop the rich audience representations needed in making writing decisions.

Conclusion

I have structured my literature review around three pieces of advice, purposely designed to call up analogous issues in literary theory:

- 1) Readers have intentions too.
- 2) There will always be gaps in the text.
- 3) Remember to ask, "Is there a reader in this class?"

My purpose in so doing is to delineate some of the parallel concerns in reading and writing theory. As we have seen, in developing an interactive model of composing, we have to move beyond the constraints of any one discipline, whether it is literary theory, reading theory, cognitive theory, or composition theory. This leads me to one last implication of the use of reader-oriented theory in developing a composing theory. It can help us start patching up the Composition/Literature split that has been occurring in the last decade. For by examining these different theories, we begin to see something very important: they ain't so different from us. By this I mean that literary theorists and reading researchers are not as far away from composition researchers as it may sometimes seem. We're all starting to share the same questions about audience, and we're even sharing the same paradigm shift. The process revolution has definitely hit the literary world too.

Examining these different theories has some practical value too, for it shows the practical use--and necessity--of using writing in the literary

classroom, for its fundamental assumption is that "reading" does not really occur until a reader responds, and of course writing is one prominent form of responding. Moreover, it shows the use and necessity of using reading in the writing classroom. Writers need to be readers, to have readers, and to see what readers do in order to develop the cognitive ability to compose interactively, that is, with their readers in mind.

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WHAT READER-ORIENTED LITERARY AND COGNITIVE
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